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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 DHAKA 001418

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [ASEC](#) [KDEM](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [BG](#)

SUBJECT: THE MAN TO SEE: CDA A.I. AND ARMY CHIEF OF STAFF  
GENERAL MOEEN DISCUSS POLITICAL SITUATION AND CARETAKER  
GOVERNMENT'S PLANS

REF: DHAKA 951

Classified By: CDA A.I. Geeta Pasi, Reasons 1.4 (B) and (D)

11. (C) Summary. Providing insight into the complicated relationship between the army and caretaker government, Chief of Army Staff General Moeen Uddin Ahmed told CDA a.i. that the recent violence had been a wake up call for the regime and outlined a series of steps that would be taken in the coming days to resume implementation of the electoral roadmap. He emphasized the restraint that the army and police had shown in the face of provocations by demonstrators, and admitted that there had been pressure from within the ranks to respond more forcefully. CDA a.i. stressed the urgency of opening up the political process by lifting the ban on politics, and highlighted the importance of respecting human rights. Moeen was frank about the caretaker government's uneven performance, limited capacity, and lack of political savvy and indicated that we would see an expansion of the Council of Advisors as part of a package of policy initiatives to be announced in early September. Moeen emphasized the army's role in supporting the caretaker government and assured us that the military would not overstep its constitutional bounds. Moeen and CDA a.i. agreed on the need for the caretaker government to improve its communications strategy, including strengthening dialogue with civil society, protecting press freedom, and reaching out to the international community. End Summary

Confident Army Chief Meets with Charge d'Affaires a.i.

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12. (C) A confident and relaxed Chief of Army Staff, General Moeen Uddin Ahmed, received the CDA a.i. at his office August 128. CDA a.i. was accompanied by Political Counselor, and General Moeen was joined by his Aide de Camp. Moeen explained that he had bypassed normal protocol channels to see CDA a.i. once he became aware that we were seeking a meeting. Moeen expressed appreciation for the support expressed by the USG since the caretaker government took office in January 2007, in particular during the recent wave of violent demonstrations.

13. (C) As he had told the Council of Advisors in private, Moeen told us that there would be hiccups on the road towards elections, but he was committed to seeing these take place before the end of 2008. CDA a.i. welcomed this assurance, noting the vital importance of keeping to the electoral roadmap and the immediate lifting of the ban on politics as a prerequisite to essential political dialogue.

## Wake Up Call for Caretaker Government

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14. (C) Moeen confided that during a recent one-on-one meeting he had told Chief Advisor Fakhruddin Ahmed that the recent violence was a "wake up call." Moeen bemoaned the lack of political savvy on the part of the Council of Advisors, noting that they lacked "tentacles" into civil society. In addition, he argued that the caretaker government had to develop better relations with the media, and moreover had to develop a comprehensive communications strategy, including an end to press harassment. Acknowledging that the government's own actions were at times self-defeating, Moeen said he had tried to dissuade the Home Ministry's from charging thousands of unnamed individuals with crimes related to the demonstrations. Moeen said he realized that this antiquated practice only served to confuse the public and create public relations challenges for the government.

## Give the People What They Want

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15. (C) Recognizing that the caretaker government's popularity had fallen, Moeen said that he was involved in the preparation of a package of initiatives that the caretaker government would present to the public in the coming weeks. He previewed this for us, noting that the package would be presented by the Chief Advisor in a public address to the nation o/a September 10. It would include the lifting of the ban on indoor politics, a limit to the scope of the anti-corruption drive, increased opportunities for small

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traders, an increase in the minimum wage for garment workers, and a moratorium on building code enforcement. Moeen said he was looking for additional items that could be included in this "basket of good news." At the same time, he and the Chief Advisor would meet with the business community to show that the regime was business-friendly and to take some of the "panic" out of the private sector.

## What Went Wrong Last Week

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16. (C) In less strident tones than reported by the press, Moeen explained how a relatively minor scuffle between army officers and students at the university had blossomed into countrywide demonstrations last week. He said that the situation would have been easily defused by the army agreeing to pull back from the campus had Dhaka University Teachers not interfered and added new demands. He also claimed that politicians had provided funds to demonstrators and also added their own people to the students who were protesting.

17. (C) Moeen said that the army troops and police involved in controlling the demonstrations had shown great restraint in the face of provocations, which included a number of their own being injured. He said that commanders had been compelled to "cool down" their subordinates who had wanted to take a harder line. Moeen confided that there were bad feelings among some in the military who had been restrained from responding more directly to attacks. He expressed satisfaction with the results of the curfew, and said he believed the worst was over. He predicted that with the curfew being raised, future steps would include the gradual re-opening of universities, with Dhaka University likely be the last to reopen.

## Importance of Human Rights and Rule of Law

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18. (C) CDA a.i. emphasized the importance of security forces respecting human rights and the rule of law during the state of emergency, noting the importance placed on these

issues by the USG and the international community. Moeen agreed, and highlighted the steps taken by the army to avoid abuses and punish those accused of misdeeds. He noted that an officer had been court-martialed and dismissed from the service for his role in the custodial death of Garo tribal activist Choilesh Ritchil (reftel). CDA a.i. urged Moeen to publicize actions taken by the army to discipline those accused of human right abuses, including members of the Rapid Action Battalion.

#### Strengthening Caretaker Government

¶9. (C) In addition to the package of policy initiatives being prepared for early September, Moeen said that there were plans to expand the current Council of Advisors by adding consultants who would serve as virtual Ministers of State. Moeen said that it had become apparent that the caretaker government provisions in the constitution (which limited the number of advisors to 10) were inadequate. Apart from their lack of political skill, the advisors did not coordinate effectively and the caretaker government's decision making structure was dysfunctional. For example, it took the advisors over an hour to decide whether to issue a curfew, close the university, and curtail media freedom during the recent demonstrations. "What should have taken seven minutes took over an hour," Moeen complained.

#### Preparing For (maybe early) Elections

¶10. (C) Outlining the ways in which the army was supporting the caretaker government, Moeen described efforts to provide flood relief and assist with voter registration and education. He said that it might be possible to move the elections forward, perhaps to October 2008, assuming that the preparations could be completed by that time. He offered to facilitate diplomatic visits to registration sites, and said that the process was moving forward with army officials working with civilians.

#### No Martial Law

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¶11. (C) Moeen acknowledged that there was much speculation about military plans to institute martial law. He said that he had resisted calls to impose military rule in January 2007 and would continue to do so. He assured CDA a.i. that the army would remain in support of the caretaker government.

#### Let's Keep in Touch

¶12. (C) CDA a.i. and General Moeen agreed that it was useful to exchange views from time to time, and agreed to keep in touch. Moeen said that he looked forward to receiving visiting senior USG officials. Moeen also said that among the reforms of the Chief Advisor's office that were being planned was the appointment of an individual charged with liaison with the international community. This should help the caretaker government coordinate better with international partners.

#### Comment

¶13. (C) Moeen's analysis of the challenges facing the caretaker government, his assessment of its strengths and weaknesses, and his prescription for implementing the roadmap were all very reassuring. He maintains that the Bangladesh Army and the USG want the same things--an effective caretaker government that is able to implement the electoral roadmap and enact reforms that will lead to free and fair elections by the end of 2008. The steps Moeen outlined to regain

popular support and strengthen the caretaker government's capacity appear sound, and also reflect an acknowledgment that a failure to follow this path would bode ill for the country and the army as an institution.

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